

Testimony for the Subcommittee on Housing & Community Opportunity; (House of Representatives Committee on Banking & Financial Affairs) 2/17/99

I am Peter J. White, Executive Director of Christopher Community, Inc. of Syracuse, New York. I would like to thank Congressman Rick Lazio and Congressman James Walsh for the opportunity to appear before the Sub-committee on Housing and Community Opportunity to discuss the present and future needs of senior citizen housing, particularly the federal 202 program.

For the record, Christopher Community, Inc. is a not-for-profit organization that develops and manages housing for low-income persons. Our primary focus is senior citizen housing as we operate approximately 2400 units in Upstate New York. We operate another 300 apartments for families primarily in the City of Syracuse. We also operate three shelters, two of which serve emotionally disturbed persons and one which provides transitional housing for women and children. We administer the Section 8 Rental Subsidy Program for Onondaga County's Towns and Villages. This Program serves more than 400 households.

When we developed the 202 housing in the late 1970's and through the 1980's, we were clearing filling a void in the need for subsidized housing for seniors. In Upstate cities, towns and villages it was clear that if we built it, the seniors would fill it; and build we did. Our experience took us far west as Buffalo, north to Watertown, South to Binghamton and Elmira and east to Utica and Albany. Our area of services covered many towns and villages in between the upstate cities as well. In most areas we were viewed as an agency cooperating with local government, churches and health care providers to achieve a community need.

In the early years, there seemed to be few seniors with extensive medical problems and the impact of aging in place had not yet come upon us.

However, over the past several years we have noticed many changes as seniors are living longer and it has become evident that many of our residents and applicants require some personal care health care services to allow them to function in the apartments they now or would call home. It would appear to me that some aspects of HR202 would address the present and future needs of the seniors who would occupy our apartments.

For instance, in our older buildings we see the need to accommodate the provision of health and personal care service. This would include conversions in individual apartments for roll-in showers, to provide for other community bath facilities and provide larger community kitchen space which would allow the preparation of meals should the need for a meals program become necessary. While it would not be our intention to convert our buildings to complete assisted living facilities there should be an effort to upgrade them so essentials are in place to allow home and health care organizations to be of sufficient assistance to our residents.

PJM

We are fortunate that Loretto, through their new dynamic Independent Living Services Program will be teaming with us to serve our increasingly frail elderly in our facilities. Their role could be easier and more efficient through selective improvements.

In a similar vein I note that in HR202 there is a reference to having service coordinators for the various facilities. I believe that the term "service coordinator" should not just apply to a particular project position in a particular project that we would fund for existing 202 senior housing but rather could also be defined in such a way to allow us to contract with qualified agencies for coordinated services to our residents. We feel that there is more depth in training and staff capability to be provided through an agency approach than if each building or group of buildings relies on one individual to serve in the senior coordinator role as is the standard now.

HR202 discusses improving market viability and services for our seniors. In this regard I would hope that Congress would advise the Secretary, even now, to cooperate more easily with those of us who manage buildings where neighborhoods have undergone change detrimental to seniors and would allow us to have security personnel evenings and weekends at the properties. Not only would this allow us to address emergencies quickly but would provide peace of mind to those seniors coming and going at a time with the normal staff is not present. In most places we have been fortunate to work closely with the police and neighborhood watch groups but as various neighborhoods change, the level of protection, in my judgement, is not suitable.

As your demographics show there is another wave of seniors coming in the near future. There are primarily women who will not have either extensive pension or social security, who will need the housing assistance and coordinated services of the 202 program. I would note to this committee that the 202 program, as it was and as it is, is a very successful federal program administered well by HUD (and I would note extremely well by the HUD, Buffalo office whose staff, past and present, we hold in high regard). This is a HUD program that should stay at the federal level and not be minced, sliced or diced by transferring it down to the states, counties, cities, towns and villages by combining its allocations with funds going to these other government units as I have seen discussed elsewhere. There is more than enough control of housing development programs in the Community Development Planning process and the Consolidated Plans of the States and of their respective communities.

In short I believe the concepts of HR202 gives this senior housing program the vitamins and prescriptions it needs to successfully meet the requirements of future senior citizens. It is a program which does not require legislative surgery but rather just a reasonable supplement to what already exists.

Thank You.